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ON THE USE OF THE TERM "NON-JEWISH" IN JEWISH STATISTICS

A Note by H. L. LURIE with a Rejoinder by the EDITORS

With the current interest in social research and statistical data concerning Jews, it is necessary to call attention to the use of the term "non-Jewish" and the pitfalls and errors that have resulted and are likely to result from comparisons of population groups classified as Jewish and non-Jewish. Similar difficulties are involved in the comparison of Jews with the total population.

Presumably the aim of such comparisons is to discover or to throw light upon the specific social and cultural characteristics of Jews. Basic to these efforts to present similarities or contrasts between the Jewish group and other groups is an assumed homogeneous "non-Jewish" or general population that is obviously non-existent. The only inherent difference between non-Jews and Jews is that the former are not Jews but beyond that, non-Jews, particularly in so diversified a country as the United States, show great variations in religious faith, in country of origin, in period of migration of individuals or ancestry, in urbanization, and in many other factors that affect social and cultural characteristics. To make comparisons between Jews and the sum total of so many varied groups frequently results in blurring group differences and in attributing an exceptional status to Jews that has no real meaning. The interpretation based upon these data would be plausible if all of the population, other than Jews, represented some common national qualities or if the Jews were the only specially selected minority element that differed grossly from all of the component parts of the balance of the population. Neither of these conditions can be accepted as established.

Recent studies have attempted to make comparisons of Jews with non-Jews in matters of urbanization, occupation, employment, depend-

ency, vital statistics, crime, and other aspects. Most of these studies have failed to present comparable data for Jews and other component elements within the general population with the result that erroneous conclusions and dubious recommendations for activities and programs are being offered. Where the so-called non-Jewish group has been divided into several of its component parts such as white and Negro, Catholic and Protestant, native-born and foreign-born, or classified by country of birth, the statistics frequently show striking differences between these classifications. As a result, statistics of Jews that have been interpreted as evidences of major differences appear rather as similarities with one or several of the groups included in the "non-Jewish" population.

I should like to refer briefly to some of the assumed Jewish differences that turn out to be a difference which Jews share in common with other elements of the population. It has been repeatedly emphasized that the ratio of urbanization of Jews in the United States is markedly different than for the population as a whole. However, Jewish immigrants were not the only groups that settled primarily in urban centers. Toward the end of the period of heavy migration, there were many other groups that showed similar tendencies. The 1930 U. S. Census reported that only 8.1 percent of all foreign-born white immigrants were living in rural-farm areas, another 11.6 percent were living in rural non-farm areas (villages) and 80.3 percent were urban residents.¹ Immigrants of various countries show less than the average 8.1 percent of rural farm population, for example, Greece, 1.4 percent; Irish Free State, 2.3 percent; Italy, 2.7 percent; England, 5.4 percent. The figure for Russia with a majority Jewish element is reported as 5.2 percent.

A recent study of youth in New York City, "The Religio-Cultural Backgrounds of New York City's Youth," by Nettie Pauline McGill, in *Better Times*, April 5, 1937 gives information on a cross section of the youth population, aged 16 to 24, divided between white and Negro and between Catholic, Jewish, Protestant and others. As compared with total young persons who were reported as having 71.7 percent of one

¹ The terms rural-farm and rural-non farm (village) applies to population living outside of cities or incorporated areas of 2500 or more population.

or both parents born in a specified foreign country, the Jewish group showed 91.3 percent. The Protestant group showed 38.5, and the Catholic group, 70.6 percent. The figure for Italians is not available but we can safely assume that the rate for foreign-born would be even higher than for Jews. In the matter of unemployment, the Jewish youth showed a ratio of 31.1 percent who were unemployed. This is less than the rate for all young persons of 36.6 percent but was higher than the ratio of 28.5 percent for the white Protestants. Catholic youth showed a ratio of 42 percent and Negro Protestants of 47.2 percent. The assumed differences in percentage distribution of occupation of the employed youth also changes when all three religious groups are compared. For example, 55.8 percent of Jewish youth were classified in the clerical occupational group as compared with 41.5 percent for all employed male youths. But white Protestants have a ratio of 51.6 percent as compared with a ratio of 38.3 for Catholic youths. In the semi-skilled occupations, the proportion of 21.9 percent for Jews which differs from 31.4 percent for all employed males is very close to 20.3 reported for Protestant white youths and differs considerably from 35.7 percent reported for Catholic youths. Similarly, the occupationsl differences between Jewish girls and "non-Jewish" girls change appreciably in comparison with white Protestant girls only.

Alleged gross differences in the ratio of dependency between Jews and the total dependent group tend to shrink considerably when the ratio for Jews is compared with the white Protestants in local relief studies. In cities with a large Negro population who show an abnormally high dependency rate, failure to separate this group from the general rate gives a wide gap between estimated Jewish and general dependency which shrinks considerably after the deduction. I have seen statements showing a relatively low rate of public old age assistance for Jews attributed to supposed economic factors ignoring entirely the facts that public old age assistance is being limited to citizens and that all immigrant groups have a high rate of non-citizenship. Numerous other instances of doubtful or erroneous conclusions could be cited arising from the use of data that assumes that "Jews" and "non-Jews" or "total population" are homogeneous and comparable groups. Several studies employing

comparisons between Jews and "non-Jews" have appeared in JEWISH SOCIAL STUDIES.

The only valid net result from comparisons of Jews and non-Jews is the finding that Jews are not likely to show the characteristics of a cross section of the American population but this obviously has no meaning since the same conclusions would be found in segregating the statistics for any other religious or nationality group from that of the population as a whole. In all probability, neither the native white American of English descent, Negroes, Italians, Irish, the Poles or any other group would be found to possess the characteristics of a cross section of our heterogeneous American population.

We need definitely to keep in mind the fact that the United States has a diversified population and hold to this as a basic consideration in social research and statistics concerning a specific group. For this reason, I am strongly of the opinion that there is very little, if any, value in statistics on Jews when the results are not or cannot be compared with various other segments of American population. It is even less meaningful and more misleading when statistics occasionally indicate that the rates for Jews correspond with the average for the general population or for "non-Jews."

A REJOINDER TO MR. LURIE

Mr. Lurie's points are well made and are theoretically unassailable. It is a fundamental principle of logic that averages and other group indices are of little significance unless the groups are homogeneous. Unfortunately, Mr. Lurie's advice is a counsel of perfection. There are, in fact, no perfectly homogeneous human groups except those artificially classified as such in accordance with whether they do or do not possess a certain arbitrarily chosen trait, as e. g. those who have reached the age of twenty-one and those who have not. Within all the groups mentioned, such as Negroes, Catholics, Protestants, urban population, foreign-born, and the like, there are very wide variations, and the Jews, coming from so many different lands form a notoriously variegated group. Mr. Lurie's objections, then, if logically pressed, would practically rule out all social statistical information — a conclusion which is perfectly correct from the point of view of ideal knowledge but hardly helpful in improving the knowledge we have by at least eliminating as much misinformation as we can. When it is charged that Jews fill our prisons, our lunatic asylums, our bank directorates, all our hospital staffs, and the Communist Party, a comparison between the Jewish and non-Jewish population, based on accurate figures, is quite relevant.

In addition, it must be borne in mind that in the present stage of Jewish statistical science it is difficult enough to ascertain figures for Jews alone. To demand from the investigator, in each case, to institute further researches into the proportion of every other similar group in the population would in most cases overtax our resources. Obviously partial information referring to Jews alone may frequently be grossly inadequate and subject to all sorts of misinterpretations, which Mr. Lurie does well to point out. This, however, can only serve as an argument for going on with our work in order to further refine it. As in all other beginnings of scientific work, we can start only with crude data. But unless we start with what is available we cannot go on to the process of refinement or to the securing of greater accuracy. Such procedure is

doubly legitimate if the investigator has reason to believe that the reader is well familiar with the limitations in such type of inquiry.

Many phases of Jewish social studies are in their scientific infancy. It is easy — too easy — to throw out the infant as not being able to do a full-grown man's work. But it is far more useful, although, alas, more difficult, to help the infant to grow to maturity.

THE EDITORS.